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AUTHOR Levy, Betty S.
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ABSTRACT

This study both examines the relationship between oral dialect proficiency--Standard English and Black Nonstandard English--and auditory comprehension of stories presented in Standard or Black Nonstandard English and attempts to obtain information concerning the reactions of black dialect speakers to oral stories in Black Nonstandard English and Standard English. The subjects were 32 black second grade boys and girls from an afterschool community center located in a low income housing project in Harlem. A black undergraduate male functioned as the experimenter. The stimulus materials consisted of a dialect proficiency task and an auditory comprehension task. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of four groups in a 2 by 2 factorial design. The factors were: (1) order of the dialect proficiency task, with either standard dialect first or second, and (2) dialect of auditory comprehension task. Each subject was individually tested. The major finding was that regardless of oral language proficiency in Standard English and in Black Nonstandard English, black second graders presented with oral stories scored higher on the auditory comprehensive questions than did comparable subjects presented with the same stories in Black Nonstandard English. (Author/JM)

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Dialect Proficiency and Auditory Comprehension in Standard and Black Nonstandard English[1,2]

Betty B. Levy
Teachers College, Columbia University

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A major controversy in the literature of the language and school achievement of disadvantaged Black children has centered around the explanation of this populations known academic failures. The major explanations can be classified under three different models: a deficit model, a difference model, and a bi-cultural model. A deficit position such as Bernsteins' (1961) explains low achievement of lower class pupils by "restrictive" language and "rigid syntax." Other researchers (Bereiter, 1968; Deutsch, 1965) also have claimed that disadvantaged children have limited language behavior and that this underdeveloped system results in cognitive deficits. A difference point of view such as that of Baratz and Baratz (1970), Labov (1965) and Stewart (1969) explains low achievement of disadvantaged children in terms of inappropriate procedures and materials in the schools, particularly in relation to Black dialect. A bicultural point of view (Forbes, 1969; Valentine, 1971) explains this population's failures by the schools' own failures to accept the children's dual dialects and adopt a truly bicultural approach.

Few studies have focused on the relationship between the Black child's dialect and his/her school achievement. The linguistic integrity of Black Nonstandard English has been well established (Bailey, 1967; Dillard, 1967; Labov, 1967; Stewart, 1969) and the suggestion that the academic achievement of a Black Nonstandard speaking child would be improved if his/her own language were used in school materials is logically compelling (Baratz & Shuy, 1969). However, since

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there is little available data to assess the effectiveness of using Black Nonstandard materials in instruction the issue remains open and controversial (Fraser, 1971).

The major empirical support for the argument that there is interference from the Black Nonstandard speakers' closely-related-but-systematically different language when he/she attempts to understand Standard English comes from a study by Baratz (1969). She administered a sentence repetition task, involving 15 Standard and 15 Black Nonstandard sentences to third and fifth grade Black and White youngsters and found that the Black children performed better on the Standard English sentences and the white children performed better on the Standard English sentences. An analysis of the errors revealed language interference from the dialect spoken by the two groups of children when attempting to repeat sentences which were not in their dominant dialect of English. Also, subjects were generally accurate in identifying the Standard stimuli as "white" and the Nonstandard stimuli as "Black."

Foreit and Donaldson (1971) criticize Baratz's interpretation of her findings, maintaining that the demonstrated ability of the Black children to correctly translate Standard English into Black Nonstandard English questions her conclusion that Black children are not bidialectic. Also, Labov (1970) contends that there is an asymetric relationship between Black children's speech production and language comprehension: a Black child may speak primarily Black Nonstandard, but may understand both Standard - Nonstandard forms.

Moreover, other findings raise questions concerning the Black child's supposed greater ability to comprehend Black Nonstandard English than to comprehend Standard English. Peisach (1965), using the Cloze technique, failed to find racial differences in children's ability to replace words deleted in passages from teachers' speech samples. Eisenberg, et.al. (1968) reported that both white and Black children had higher listening comprehension scores for monosyllabic words in response to white (as opposed to Black) speakers. Weener (1969) asked Black and

white first graders to recall word lists recorded by middle- and lower-class women and found that speaker differences was significant for the white children but not for the Black children. Quay (1971) tested 100 four-year old Black Head Start youngsters on the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test and failed to find any IQ differences according to whether the test was administered in Standard or in Black Nonstandard English. Torrey (1969) using a matching procedure (oral phrases to pictures) found that Black second graders could comprehend morphemes which did not seem to occur in their spontaneous speech. Frentz (1971) using a task similar to Torrey (1969) found that Black Nonstandard speakers did not perform better with their own dialect materials and did not perform better than Standard English users on the Nonstandard dialect materials.

The above studies suggest that language production and language comprehension are two separate issues. They also suggest, contrary to what the difference model would predict but compatible with a bicultural model, that Black Nonstandard speakers may be bidialectal aurally.

A major limitation of all of the above studies is their use of short, simple material, often unconnected, and unlike the language of everyday communication. A second limitation is that except for the Frentz (1971) study, it was simply assumed that white children were Standard speakers and Black children were Nonstandard speakers. No one tested either group on its actual oral competence in the two dialects.

The present study attempted to shed light on the above controversy by examining the relationship between oral dialect proficiency (Standard English and Black Nonstandard English) and auditory comprehension of stories presented in Standard or Black Nonstandard English. In addition, since much has been made of the need for "relevance" of materials to students' backgrounds (Aarons, 1969; Forbes, 1969) the study also attempted to obtain information concerning the reactions of Black dialect speakers to oral stories in Black Nonstandard English and Standard English.

METHOD

Subjects. The Ss were 32 Black second grade boys and girls from an after-school community center located in a low income housing project in Harlem. Most of the Ss lived in the project and attended the nearby special service public elementary school. The age of subjects ranged from 7.0 years to 9.2 years with a mean of 8.0 years. A Black undergraduate male functioned as the E.

Materials. The stimulus materials consisted of a dialect proficiency task (DPT), and an auditory comprehension task (ACT). (The materials were presented and oral responses recorded by two Wollensak recorders).

1. DPT. This task consisted of an experimental version of 20 sentences, developed by Baratz and Stewart and similar (only shortened and simplified) to the 30 sentence version used by Baratz (1969). The DPT has two parts: DPT_1, 10 sentences in Standard (S) English and DPT_2, the same 10 sentences in Black Nonstandard (NS) English. All the sentences were taped by a white adult male bidialectal speaker and obtained from the Education Study Center, Washington, D.C. The sentences were designed to include the major contrasting structural features of Standard and Black Nonstandard English and are considered a measure of oral availability of the language structures of the two English dialects. There were 22 language features scored in DPT_1 (S) and 23 scored in DPT_2 (NS), and are scored accordingly.

2. ACT. The auditory comprehension task consisted of two taped sets of four stories with seven questions after each story. One set of stories and questions were presented in Nonstandard English; the other set was presented in Standard English. All the stories and questions were identical in both versions; only the dialect in which they were presented varied. The four stories were chosen from the experimental edition of Standard and Nonstandard English readers (developed by the Education Study Center, Washington, D.C.). Stories were selected to represent a range of contents, length, and grammatical constructions. Three of the four stories appear to be of "high" relevance to urban Black children. The fourth story is an adaptation of a Greek myth.

The seven questions following each story were specially constructed to refer to specific details in each story. The NS set of stories and questions was conversationally read onto tape by four male and female seventh and eighth grade Black students from a Harlem junior high school. Likewise, the Standard English version of stories and questions was conversationally read onto tape by four male and female white students from two New York City public schools.

Design. The Ss were randomly assigned to one of four groups in a 2 x 2 factorial design. The factors were 1) order of administration of DPT, either S-NS, or NS-S; and 2) dialect of ACT, either NS, or S.

Procedure. Each S was individually tested by a Black male examiner. For the DPT, Ss were instructed to repeat exactly what they heard as best they could. The Ss responses were tape recorded, and subsequently transcribed and scored. After each part of the DPT Ss were asked whether the speaker was a man or a woman, and if he/she were Black or white. The ACT was then administered, and Ss were asked to listen carefully to each story so they would be able to answer some questions and also tell how much they liked each story. After answering the questions following each story, Ss were asked to rate the story as to how much they liked the story, how much they liked the person telling the story, and how much they thought their friends would like to hear this person tell a story. The ratings were obtained by having Ss point to one of five bars of different heights which they were told represented 1) not at all (shortest), 2) a little (next shortest), 3) so-so (medium height), 4) pretty much (next to the tallest), and 5) a lot (tallest). The E read all the choices to each S, who indicated his response by pointing to the appropriate bar and/or stating his choice. Ss were then asked if the person telling the story was a boy or a girl, and whether he/she was Black or White.

RESULTS

The mean score on the Standard version of DPT was significantly higher ($p < .01$) than on the Nonstandard version. The mean correct was 15.3 (out of 22) and 11.5 (out of 23) respectively. The order of administration NS-S, S-NS did not result in any significant difference.

The ACT score for each S was the total number correct across the four stories for the seven questions, with a maximum of 28. The answers were scored by two judges who agreed on 98.3% of the answers. Ss in the Standard treatment performed statistically higher ($p < .01$) on all four stories of the ACT than did Ss in the Black Nonstandard treatment. Their total means for the four stories were 19.9 and 17.2 respectively.

Product moment correlations on all the major variables were computed and yielded several statistically significant findings, at $p < .01$. 1) Both the S and NS version of DPT were significantly correlated with ACT total scores (r=.40, and .43 respectively) but were not significantly correlated with each other. This finding suggests that in general Ss who are more proficient in oral language are also more proficient in auditory comprehension, and that S and NS may be considered independent measures of S and NS proficiency. 2) Overall the NS version of DPT was correlated with Story Three (r=.39) and Story Four (r=.53); and the S version of DPT was correlated with Story Two (r=.40). Within treatments these same relationships existed. 3) The responses to the affective questions yielded a few significant correlations; the score on the S version of DPT correlated (r=.40) with how well Ss indicated they liked the person telling Story One. The Ss who indicated they liked the Story One storyteller a lot, tended to score higher on Story One (r=.42), Story Two (r=.40) and the total ACT score (r=.40). These relationships did not hold up within treatment. The only other statistically significant correlation of interest indicated that age was correlated with total ACT scores, overall (r=.51), within S (r=.65) treatment, and within NS treatment (r=.59).

In order to further examine the effect of dialect proficiency on auditory comprehension, Ss were blocked on their DPT scores and a 2 x 4 analysis of covariance, with age as the covariate was performed on the ACT scores. The factors were: a) Treatment; either NS or S; and b) DPT score; either low S and low NS; low S and high NS; high S and low NS; or high S and high NS. A median split was performed on S and NS scores such that scores above the median were rated "high" and scores below the median were rated "low." The analysis of covariance yielded only one statistically significant finding, a main effect for treatment (See Tables 1 & 2) $F(1,24)=8.66$, $p < .01$. The age adjusted means on ACT were 20.2 and 16.7 for S and NS respectively. Ss hearing stories in Standard English performed significantly better on the ACT questions than did Ss hearing the same stories in Black Nonstandard English, regardless of their oral dialect proficiency. (See Figure 1)

In terms of the affectivity ratings it appeared that all four stories were well-liked, with the total mean score of 4.6, falling half-way between 4 ("pretty much") and 5 ("a lot"). The person telling each story was also well liked (mean 3.9) although not rated as high as the story itself. Ss thought their friends would like the stories "pretty much" (mean 4.2). Stories were rated slightly but not significantly higher in the Standard treatment, except for Story Four, which was rated slightly higher in the Black Nonstandard treatment. Interestingly, Story Four was Icarus, a Greek myth, and seemingly the least "relevant" in content for urban Black children.

On the S version of the DPT, 78% of the Ss incorrectly identified the speaker as being a Black male, though 85% correctly identified the Black Nonstandard version as being spoken by a Black male. Thus, Ss generally labeled the DPT speaker as "Black", regardless of the dialect (Standard or Black Nonstandard) spoken. For the ACT, the results were similar. On the average, 58% of the Ss incorrectly identified the Standard stories as being spoken by a Black child, and 90% of the Ss correctly identified the Black Nonstandard stories as being spoken by a Black child. Ss easily identified Black Nonstandard speakers as being Black, but often misidentified white Standard speakers as also being Black.

DISCUSSION

The major finding of the present study was that regardless of oral language proficiency in Standard English and in Black Nonstandard English, Black second graders presented with oral stories in Standard English scored higher on the auditory comprehension questions than did comparable subjects presented with the same stories in Black Nonstandard English. As can be seen in Table 1, however, there was a consistent pattern of ranking of the ACT scores according to the DPT score within treatment. That is, within the Standard treatment as well as within the Black Nonstandard treatment, Ss who scored higher on the DPT scored higher on the ACT. Ss who were least orally proficient, scoring low on both S and NS parts of the DPT, performed particularly poorly in the Black Nonstandard treatment. In fact, the greatest contrast in ACT scores between treatments, as well as within treatments, occurred for this Low-Low DPT group, suggesting that Ss with limited oral language proficiency have difficulty in auditory comprehension when stories are presented in Black Nonstandard English. The correlational findings also support this conclusion.

This main finding of Ss superior performance in the Standard condition conflicts with a difference model prediction but is consistent with a bicultural model prediction. According to the difference model, subjects who scored highest in the Black Nonstandard DPT should have performed better in comprehending Black Nonstandard stories; subjects who scored highest in oral repetition of Standard speech should have performed better in comprehending Standard stories. The rationale in both cases is that there is less "interference" from a competing dialect. In fact, the data show no such pattern. Rather, subjects consistently performed better in the Standard English condition. These findings tend to support Frentz (1971), Labov (1970), Quay (1971), Torrey (1969), and Weener (1969) indicating that Black children tend to be bidialectal aurally. The present findings are more understandable within a bicultural model than within an interference or difference model. First, the oral language of the youngsters studied

contains features of both Standard English and Black Nonstandard English. Although subjects were generally more proficient in repeating Standard sentences, their oral speech could be characterized more accurately as bidialectal than as mainly Black Nonstandard or mainly Standard. Second, unlike the Baratz (1969) study, the young Black children in this study did not accurately racially differentiate Standard and Black Nonstandard speakers. Black Nonstandard speakers were usually identified as "Black" but often Standard speakers were misidentified as "Black". Since the Black children in this study live in a community which is predominantly Black and working class, but which is not as isolated or as racially segregated as other Northern urban ghettoes, it is possible that they hear Black people in their community speaking both Standard English and Black Nonstandard English. Thus, Standard English is not labeled "white" whereas both Standard and Black Nonstandard speech could be labeled "Black." In sum, it seems that a simplified difference model of language does not fit either the spoken language of the Black second graders examined in this study, or their identification of the spoken language of others.

The correlational findings concerning "relevance" of the materials presented and childrens' liking and performance were on-the-whole non-significant and again lend support to a bicultural position rather than to a difference one. Ratings of stories, storytellers, and judgments of friends' liking of the stories were generally high and were not related to whether the stories were told in Standard English or in Black Nonstandard English. The ratings were also not related to whether the stories were actually identified by the subjects as being told by a Black child or a white child, or whether the content was supposedly "relevant" or "irrelevant" to the child. Story Four, about the Greek myth Icarus, was not liked any less than the more seemingly "relevant" stories and was even rated higher in the Black Nonstandard version. It is not clear what made these stories so interesting to the children - simply the fact that they were about other young children relating to each other in emotionally rich and socially honest ways may

have been enough "relevance" to intrigue them. Clearly, the language and setting of the stories did not appear to be key variables. Also, the predicted relationship between the childrens' affective reactions to stories and their performance on comprehension questions on the stories held up only for the first story. This finding probably had more to do with subjects initial attending to and "buying into" the experimental situation than to any hypothesized connection between liking a story and performance.

It would appear that notions of "relevance" which infer sharp differences (e.g. "Black dialect stories for Black children," "Urban ghetto stories for urban ghetto children") are inadequate. For the Black second graders in this study, good stories are good stories, whether in Black dialect or not, and whether about Black boys on the street or mythical boys flying too near the sun. It should be made clear, however, that since the Black subjects examined in this study were not speakers of primarily Black dialect, the linguistic argument concerning Black dialect readers for Black dialect speakers remains unanswered. The results might be different for a sample of Black youngsters speaking mainly Black dialect.

Some methodological comments are worth noting. First, the subjects own higher performance in oral Standard English, coupled with the subtle effects of the "demand characteristics" of the experimental situation, might explain the present results. Though rapport with the Ss was good and a Black examiner worked with each child individually, the situation was still rather formal, possibly too test-like and school-like, to permit the children to respond as freely to the Black dialect materials. In addition, the examiner, although Black, used primarily Standard English when speaking with the youngsters which indirectly might have cued them to Standard English patterns. Also, the equipment and tasks might have been biased in favor of "formal" language and thus may have encouraged maximum performance in Standard English. If Standard English patterns were perceived as socially more appropriate for that situation, it could explain why the children could reproduce both dialect forms but better reproduce Standard forms. It could

also explain why the children in the Standard version answered more questions correctly. Also, since Black English involves elaborate verbal styles which are socially cued (Kochman, 1969), the attempt to isolate only the grammatical and phonological features and then to test differences in a relatively formal setting may have obscured other relationships which may exist between spoken language and auditory comprehension of materials in varying dialect. Further research, with a more Black dialect-speaking population, taking into account contextual factors and allowing for a more spontaneous response, might produce effects opposite to those found in this study.

The findings of this study raise more questions than they answer. A difference model of language behavior is conceptually more satisfying than a negative deficit model which focuses on weaknesses within the child and tends to ignore positive differences or social contextual and structural factors. However, as Valentine (1970) has argued, a simplified either-or difference model cannot fully explain Black youngsters language behavior or school achievement. If we follow a bicultural model and assume that Black youngsters are "biculturated" to some extent, the question remains, to what extent? In terms of oral language proficiency and auditory comprehension, how bidialectal are Black children? Would speakers of primarily Black Nonstandard better comprehend Standard and Black Nonstandard speech? What are the social and situational cues influencing auditory comprehension of the two dialects or degrees of dialect? What are the influences of age, sex, class, geography, housing patterns, types of schooling, etc., on dual dialect learning and performance? And finally, how can the schools best identify and meet the needs of children speaking and/or comprehending varying stages and degrees of Standard and Black Nonstandard English?

Table 1
Age Adjusted ACT Total Scores

DPT SCORES		TREATMENT	
DPT_1 (S)	DPT_2 (NS)	Treatment 1 (NS)	Treatment 2 (S)
Low (08-15)	Low (06-11)	12.70	19.26
Low (08-15)	High (12-17)	16.75	19.28
High (16-22)	Low (06-11)	17.83	20.17
High (16-22)	High (12-17)	18.02	21.49
Mean Total		16.72	20.22

Table 2

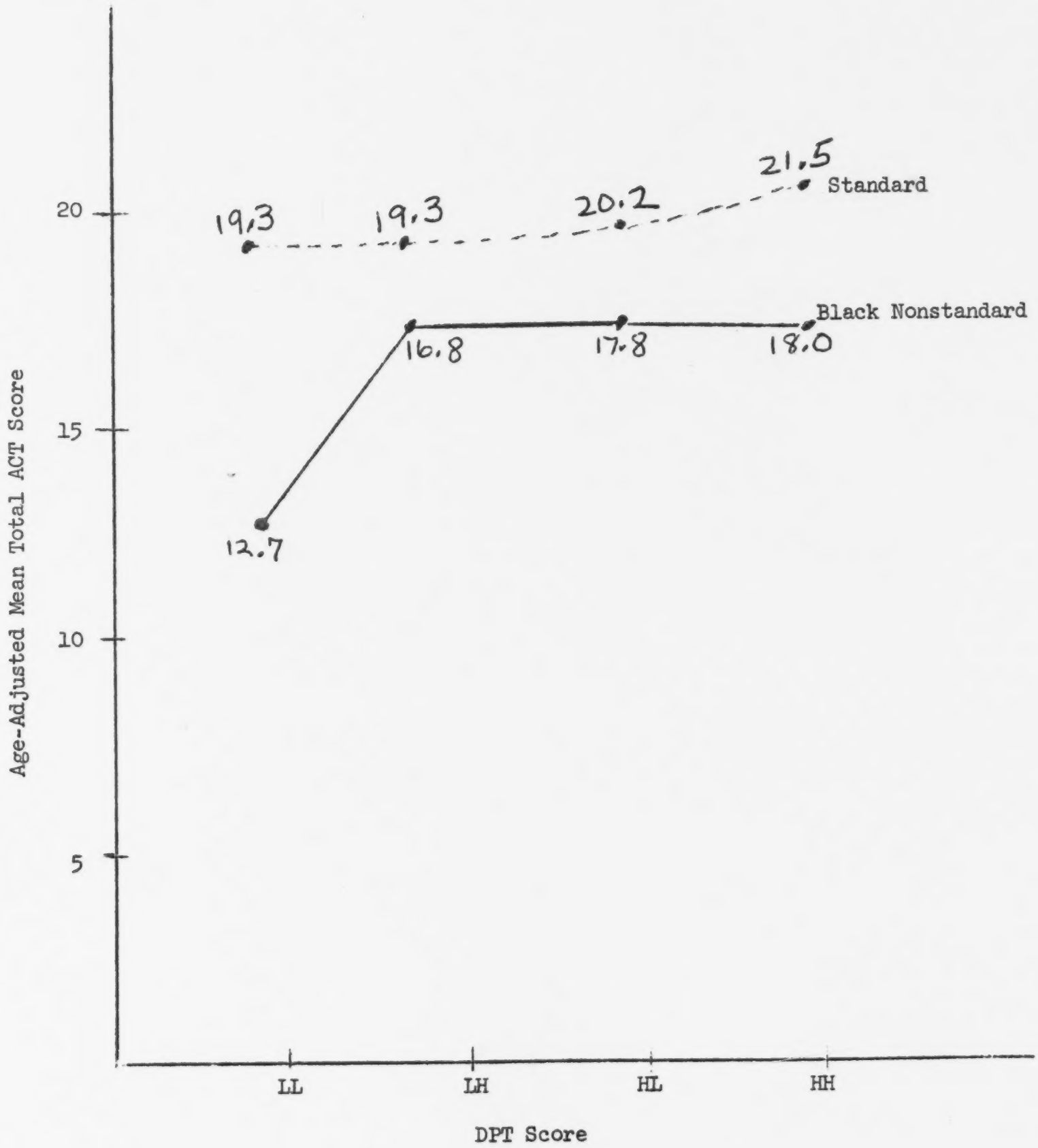
Analysis of Covariance of Total ACT Scores
(Standard vs. Black Nonstandard Treatment) for
different level DPT Scores using age as a covariate

Source	df	MS	F
DPT Score (D)	3	5.357	1.66
Treatment (T)	1	27.831	8.66*
T x D	3	1.918	0.59
Within	24	3.211	

* $p < .01$

Figure 1

Mean Adjusted ACT Scores for the four DPT Score Variations by Treatment



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